"Tonight We Are All Gaza"

By ***Matt*** *- Posted on* ***10 February 2010***

Eyewitness Report to Gaza Destruction

When four Kansas City area residents traveled to Gaza to deliver medical aid to Palestinians in January, they planned to lift the spirits of Gazans in the besieged land. In turn they were consoled by Palestinians after hearing traumatic stories, like the one where a girl was telling a story of her father being shot in the forehead after surrendering to Israeli military forces. Or the story of the Samouni family, who lost 29 members – a family of farmers with no political ties, mostly women and children. Mohamed El-Housiny, an architect and MBA student on his second aid convoy, thought he was there to give strength, but was overwhelmed with emotion after witnessing the devastation and hearing stories of the trauma.

An event titled "One Year Later: Besieged Gaza Still Standing Tall" attracted 200 people to the Doubletree Hotel in Overland Park on Sunday, February 7. The event included speakers and spirited performances by Dabke folk dancers from Milwaukee and Nahsheed singers. The main speaker Osama Abu Irshaid was unable to attend due to poor weather conditions in the eastern states.

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Goldstone Report documents atrocities of Operation Cast Lead

After past attempts to visit his family in Gaza, Palestinian-American Dr. Mohamed Ouda joined the Viva Palestina medical aid convoy and entered Gaza for 48 hours with 250 vehicles and hundreds of participants on January 6, 2010. He gave a presentation of the recent history surrounding Gaza and a full accounting of the impact of the twenty-two day Israeli military campaign Operation Cast Lead. His report drew from the 575-page Goldstone Report released in September 2009.

"Ending occupation is a prerequisite to a return to a dignified life for Palestinians, as well as development and a peaceful solution to the conflict." – Goldstone Report, September 2009 [1]

Dr. Ouda's report was a swirl of statistics of the crushing devastation – 60 police stations destroyed, 30 mosques, 280 schools (43% of all schools) destroyed, and 22 university buildings damaged. Sixteen medical personnel killed

and 28 ambulances destroyed, forcing emergency responders to transport the injured on donkey carts.

Three hundred twenty workshops were destroyed, destruction of farmland and equipment led to a 50 percent drop in agriculture income, accounting for a 50-75% unemployment rate. The devastation to businesses, farming, and all social life "force [Palestinians] to live in the stone age," Dr. Ouda reported.

Three hundred fifty-five children were killed, 2000 children were made orphans after their parents were killed, and tens of thousands of children needed trauma counseling. The Goldstone Report noted "some 30 per cent of children screened at UNRWA schools had mental health problems" and "over 300 women had been widowed as a result of the military operations and had become dependent on food and income assistance."

Dr. Ouda shared his own memory "as a child living through the shelling" during the 1967 war. He expressed the widespread trauma for children in Gaza today because of the increased power of munitions used during the 22-day offensive.

He wrapped up his presentation by saying that $4.5 billion were pledged by Arab and other nations to rebuild Gaza. None of the funds have been used because of Israel's blockade. "Gaza is a prison and the jailer does not allow you in," Ouda underscored.

Eyewitness accounts from participants of the Gaza aid convoy

Mohamed El-Housiny asked the audience to imagine Gaza as he described the surroundings of devastated Gaza and the personal impact of holding a loved one during their last moments of life. These scenes were described to Mohamed and dozens of others as they traveled through Gaza to deliver aid to Palestinians in a symbolic gesture of solidarity.

Mohamed instilled a sense of immediacy in his presentation, building on the difficult stories he heard. He brought the pain and suffering from "over there," thousands of miles away, challenging us to work harder and envision a free Palestine.

Jomana Qaddour, a law student who also joined the aid convoy, connected the ongoing siege of Gaza with the international sanctions on Iraq in the 1990's, which led to the deaths of 500,000 children. "Why are we letting these things happen again?" she asked.

"Going into Gaza will always be a shock, no matter how many times you've been." - Mohamed El-Housiny during his talk at the Doubletree event.

During her brief stay in Gaza in January to deliver medical aid with the Viva Palestina convoy, Jomana watched the sea where Israeli warships were stationed. This reminded her that “Gaza is a prison,” walled off from the outside world. She remarked that Egypt with the help of the US and Israel is building a wall along the Egypt-Gaza border eighteen feet below the surface. The underground wall is intended to cut off the last source of goods flowing into Gaza. “Why are they building a wall? Didn’t we learn from South Africa and Germany?”

Jomana observed that Palestinians in Gaza “have more spirit and are willing to stand for freedom for a long time to come.”

Sara Jawhari, a Palestinian-American and broadcast journalist student at Johnson County Community College, stated the intent of the medical aid convoy was to relieve suffering. “It is strictly pro-humanity. We don’t care if you are Israeli, Palestinian, if you are Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or atheist. It does not matter,” as Jawhari told a *Campus Ledger* reporter recently. [2]

The event held on February 7 to commemorate the lives of survivors and those killed during the deadly attacks was one of the more respectful and colorful events seen in Kansas City to reflect on Palestinian life and culture.

Rarely are stories and images portrayed so humbly by trauma witnesses; they brought the struggle and pain home to the event participants, leaving many with the notion that “we are all Gaza.”

American Muslims for Palestine (AMP), the main organizer of the event based out of Chicago, has attracted a large following with 12 local chapters through the Midwest and stretching to both coasts. The group is providing fresh energy to the Palestinian rights movement in the US by organizing events with prominent speakers like Alison Weir of IfAmericansKnew.org and George Galloway of Viva Palestina, as well as producing quality literature, like the 36-page booklet summarizing the Goldstone Report on Gaza. Taking note of the group’s energetic commitment, the group’s director said “Palestine is our life!”

UPCOMING "REPORT BACK" EVENTS -

If you were unable to attend the event on February, plan to join students at two upcoming events on area college campuses.

> **February 15, 7:30 pm** - The Muslim Student Association at UMKC invites you to **"Viva Palestina: Report Back from Gaza."** Kansas City area students will report back on a convoy delivering humanitarian aid and medical supplies into war-torn Gaza. Speakers **Mohamed El-Housiny** and **Sara Jawhari** will share their first hand experiences in the Gaza Strip. Guests from **7thGIV**, an independent group of students from Haskell Indian Nations University, will speak about their cultural exchange

with youth in the West Bank last year. **Pizza and refreshments** will be served. Admission is free and open to all.

Location: UMKC Royall Hall 111, 5200 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, Missouri

For more info, contact - umkcmsa@umkc.edu

Event flyer - http://cjme.org/images/flyer-viva-palestina-umkc.pdf

February 22, 7:00 pm - A **"Viva Palestina: Report Back from Gaza"** event will be held at Johnson County Community College. Featured speakers include **Sara Jawhari** and **Mohamed El-Housiny**. Admission is free and open to the public.

Location: Johnson Co. Community College, Craig Community Auditorium (GEB-238), 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, Kansas

[1] "HUMAN RIGHTS IN PALESTINE AND OTHER OCCUPIED ARAB TERRITORIES: Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict," UN Human Rights Council, September 25, 2009, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48.pdf

[2] "Aiding the 'world's largest prison,'" by Jason Bennett, *Campus Ledger*, January 28, 2010, http://campusledger.com/news/2010/01/26/aiding-worlds-largest-prison

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